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Observation of Children's Story Time

The Family Storytime program held every Friday at the Marco Island Public Library is run by branch manager, Brenda Rasch. Miss Brenda chooses a new theme each week and designs an activity around each theme. The program runs from 10:30am-11:15am and is available to all ages but is mostly attended by toddlers to children 5 years of age. On season, the library sees as many as 30-40 kids during story time and children are often accompanied by their grandparents; however, off season expected attendance ranges between 10-12 kids accompanied by their parents. The usual structure is as follows: Miss Brenda first reads two books, then initiates a dance break, reads the last two books, plays one more song, and ends with an activity. Due to the library's limited budget, the content of the activity is often an arts and crafts project involving coloring and gluing.

Story time is held in the event room behind the children's area and unlike other Collier County Library children's programs, families do not need to pre-register. Systems are in place and recognized by families who attend regularly. For example, adults know to take a carpet square from the basket by the door and sit in a half circle around Miss Brenda's chair. Beside Miss Brenda's chair is a table displaying books that match the day's theme and a CD player for music breaks. Families who know the theme ahead of time may dress up in clothes matching the theme of the day. There are no specific accommodations made for families, but children who struggle to sit still have the option to color on one of the activity tables

while the books are being read. There are also stuffed animals in the children's area available for kids to bring with them into story time as a companion or reading buddy.

Today's story time was run by Mr. Fred, a part-time employee who has worked at the library for 9 years, as Miss Brenda was away on vacation. The theme of this story time, the beach, was decided previously by Miss Brenda. Mr. Fred displayed books on the table pertaining to the beach and various sea animals. Some children arrived dressed as Ariel or wearing shark shirts to follow the theme. Mr. Fred began by reading a counting book, *I Spy Under the Sea* by Edward Gibbs and initiated participation through questions, occasionally asking kids to identify the sea animal and encouraging them to count the number of animals on the page out loud with him.

Next, he read a rhyming book titled *Hello Ocean* by Pam Muñoz Ryan. This book discussed the five senses which offered many opportunities for participation by asking children to use their senses. However, Mr. Fred continued to ask general questions, such as "Do you wear sunscreen at the beach?" and "Do you wear a hat to protect yourself from the sun?" After a while, the children became restless, and he therefore finished the book without any more pauses and began the first dance break. He played "Wheels on the Bus" and invited children to stand up and dance with him during the song, which many children did. After the dance break, Mr. Fred recaptured their attention for the next story, *Five Little Sharks Swimming in*

the Sea by Steve Metzger. This book can be sung as a children's song; however, the children were becoming increasingly antsy, and he once again rushed through the book. Instead of reading the last book, he decided to play one last song matching the theme, "Baby Shark", and then ushered everyone over to the tables to begin the activity.

The activity was to create a crab out of red coffee filters. Children folded the coffee filters in half, glued them onto blue paper, and pasted on tiny hearts cut from a die cut machine which were designed to appear as the crab's claws. They were also given googly eyes and markers to add to their picture where some children drew the sun, trees, and/or sand. Mr. Fred had set up sixteen activity mats for children and arranged four chairs per table. However, 30 children attended the program, so many families did not get to participate in the activity. Instead, Mr. Fred laid butcher paper and markers down on two empty tables and allowed children to draw and color.

While Mr. Fred ran the story time well overall, there were some elements that could have been executed differently. While reading *Hello Ocean*, it would have been appropriate to ask children to use their senses by performing activities such as touching the floor, smelling the room, or listening to the sounds around them. Another idea would have been to inquire what senses they can use at the beach, such as "What does saltwater taste like?" and "How does the sand feel?" These questions may have held their attention and participation longer than binary (*yes* or *no*)

questions. Additionally, selecting songs specifically related to the theme would help with the continuity of the program.

Some other suggestions for this story time include creating a sample of what the completed activity will look like and showing the sample before dismissing families to the activity tables. Mr. Fred did visit each table individually to discuss the activity; however, by the time he reached the back tables, the families were already completing their version of the activity. Also, having extra materials prepared and ready beforehand would have ensured all families had the opportunity to participate. Further, because the activity started earlier than anticipated, families finished well before 11:15.

The librarians only allowed permission to ask the staff questions and did not allow interaction with the children or their families; therefore, I was unable to inquire about the differences between Miss Brenda and Mr. Fred. Overall, the story time was planned and executed well, but would have benefited if led by someone with more experience managing children's programs. I see this observation as an opportunity to appreciate the education and background knowledge I am gaining to create and achieve successful story times in the future.